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THE FRENCH CANADIAN PROBLEM

FROM AN AMERICAN STANDPOINT

BY GERALD MORGAN

Before the war broke out it was not generally known in the United States, or even in England, that there was any French Canadian problem. But since the leader of the French Canadian Nationalist Party, Henri Bourassa, recommended openly to his followers a policy not only of non-enlistment but also of avowed hostility to the Government at Ottawa, this little known political puzzle suddenly acquired an interest for London, Paris, Berlin and Washington.

The Nationalist point of view, as expressed by Henri Bourassa, and in which a very large majority of his compatriots appear to share, is on the whole resentful, if not actually hostile, toward the British Empire. Bourassa has said publicly, over and over again, that the Germans in Alsace-Lorraine were no worse than the British in Ireland. Liberty, so runs his argument, is not at stake, for injustice has been practiced by all nations, even by the French (remember his audience is Roman Catholic) when they persecuted the monastic orders. And as for the Dominion Government at Ottawa, he goes on, is there liberty there? No, he replies; for although the Government of Quebec allows the British language to be taught in its schools, the Government of Ontario denies permission for the teaching of French to French Canadian children. Therefore, Mr. Bourassa concludes, our moral allegiance is due to the Province of Quebec, not to the British Empire, nor to France, nor to the Dominion; so why enlist?

Whether or not Henri Bourassa fairly represents his people, it is a fact that they have not many of them enlisted. It was recently stated, on the authority of the newspaper

L'Eclair of Quebec, that there had been over thirty thousand French Canadian enlistments. The *Eclair,* however, is not a trustworthy witness in this matter. Canadian Government officials, qualified to form an estimate, state that no figures have been compiled which would show exactly how many men of French birth have enlisted. Figures exist for those battalions recruited exclusively from French Canadians, but these figures would be too low, since French Canadians have also enlisted—how many is not known—in battalions chiefly British. But on the other hand the figures given by the *Eclair* are considered much too high by Canadians competent to judge. Were an estimate to be hazarded, probably the figure 15,000 would come nearest the mark. There are 2,000,000 French Canadians. The proportion of enlistments to the general population of British Canada is at least 7 per cent. In French Canada the same proportion is certainly not much more than 1 per cent., and probably somewhat less. These figures tell the story.

To begin with, there is a historical basis for the traditional independence and isolation of the French Canadians. For shortly after the Treaty of Paris legalized the cession of Canada to England, certain rights were permanently reserved (by the Quebec Act of 1774) to the French colonists of the Province of Quebec. Special privileges were accorded to the Roman Catholic Church; French civil law was established side by side with British criminal law. The privileges then acquired by the French Canadians of the Province of Quebec endure to this day, and virtually legalize a nation within a nation. So large a measure of self government has made of the French Canadians a people of independent interests and aims, isolated in sentiment from the rest of Canada, loyal to the Province of Quebec, not to the Dominion. This policy of " independence and isolation " is quite as strong today as it was in 1774. And it is an interesting fact that the framers of that act of 1774 expected a diametrically opposite outcome. They thought that the surest way to weld the French in Canada into the English-speaking whole was by a policy of conciliation, by a regard for the interests, even the prejudices, of the individual. Their policy failed, in those directions where it did actually fail, through the interposition of the Roman Catholic Church; and in the attitude of the Church lies another basis for French Canadian sentiment, as it exists today.

From the very beginning the Roman Catholic Church had a very strong hold on the "habitants," and her policies were, from the first, conservative. The Province of Quebec, she felt, was hers; and naturally she showed no sympathy for the American Revolutionists, whom, under Montgomery's command, she repulsed from her soil. Her attitude at this time was interesting, for France was allied with the Americans in a war against England; but she showed that she felt her interests lay with the Provincials of Quebec, and secondly with Rome rather than with Paris.

Thenceforward the Church followed a policy of isolation. To the French in Canada the French Revolution brought no intellectual enfranchisement; it was too far away. In fact all foreign events seemed far away in the years which followed, except Dominion politics.

When the Roman Catholics of the Province of Quebec were obliged to enter Dominion politics they entered as a unit. After the Federation Act of 1867, which they could not well avoid, they became, while retaining all their old provincial rights, part of the new Canadian nation, and thereby were closely related to British imperial affairs. They found themselves a self-contained permanent Catholic minority in a Protestant government. This fact not only strengthened them in their historic faith, but brought the Church into party politics.

Now in countries exclusively Catholic the radical and liberal elements of the population find expression in an anti-clerical party. In such countries the anti-clericals serve an absolutely necessary purpose. But where a large body of Catholics are found living together, impelled by nationalist aspirations of some sort, but repressed by Protestant majorities, no anti-clerical party forms, and the aims of priests and people become one. In Ireland this is true; and the result is in effect the stoppage of national progress. Irish and French Canadian Nationalists are alike, as their name implies, a permanent opposition; for no matter how far removed from Nationalist problems the issues before them may be, they never consider those issues except in the light of their own circumscribed political aims. Naturally there results a most unhealthy political and social condition.

Irish priests and French Canadian priests are alike ardent Nationalists; and consciously or not they use Nationalist impulses to serve the purposes of the Church.

Thus the priests in French Canada use the impulse of a narrow nationalism to further a policy of isolation; to prevent the learning of English; to prevent emigration. It would be too much to say that priests actually discourage enlistment in this war, but their hearts are not with England. The loyalty they preach is first to the Holy Father in Rome; secondly to the soil of the Province of Quebec. They honestly desire to save souls, and the best way to do this, in their opinion, is to keep their flocks at home, safe from the tree of knowledge, safe from all education except their own, servants of the Church, and defenders of her altars. This is the general policy of the Canadian priests, exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding. They form the principal basis for the sentiment of isolation in French Canada, a sentiment which in turn, as in the speeches of the Nationalist leader Henri Bourassa, may readily be confused with rank disloyalty to the Dominion and to the Empire.

With regard to the future, the Dominion Government faces two distinct alternatives. One is conscription, which appeals to a certain type of practical mind. Conscription at this time would, if carried out in French Canada, have the value of a force act. It might lead to bloodshed, and if it did lead to bloodshed, the result would be to confirm indifference and resentment into disloyalty and hatred. With the history of Ireland before them, the Dominion authorities may well hesitate before taking such a step.

The second alternative, it must be admitted, is a mere continuation of what is often called the spoilt child policy. That is to say, French Canada may be left to herself, as she has been in the last 150 years, to work out her own isolated, isolating destiny. At least, so the defenders of this policy justly say, the habitants are thrifty, orderly, and unrebellious people. Give them their own way, and perhaps emigration, or immigration, or the mere growth of the Dominion will solve the problem; or perhaps the forces of progress will eventually form an anti-clerical, liberal majority even in the Province of Quebec, and at last make of that province a true part of the whole Dominion.

It is probable that the second alternative, even though it be called mere drifting, will in the long run be found the wiser course. For conscription would at the very least alienate two million hearts for many years to come.

GERALD MORGAN.